

**VITALITY TASK FORCE
REPORT TO 229th CONVENTION OF THE DIOCESE OF NJ
March 1, 2013**

The Vitality Task Force was organized by Bishop Cancell in early March 2012 for the purpose of defining a strategy for evaluating the viability of our congregations and creating the interventions necessary so that we can move forward together as healthier congregations in our mission as the Diocese of New Jersey. The Task Force membership includes: Gretchen Zimmerman (Board of Missions), Marshall Shelly (Congregational Development), Phyllis Jones, Cecilia Alvarez, Debi Clarke, Cynthia McFarland, and the recent addition of Gina Walsh-Minor, Susan Richardson, and David Perkins. The Task Force has been meeting regularly since that time, has consulted with other Dioceses, utilized outside resources, gathered data (some already available via The Board of Missions and other sources within the Diocese), and with this report proposes a plan for which it would like Diocesan Convention endorsement.

Therefore, the Task Force would like to recommend that we, as a Diocese, commit to a "Covenant For Abundant Life," the kind of covenant God speaks of Deuteronomy 30:19: "I set before you life and death...choose life so that you and your descendants may live." The Task Force has formed this Covenant of Life around 3 V's: **Vision, Vitality and Viability.**

Vision: In order to choose life, we need to agree on what life looks like. To that end, we would like to propose the adoption of the Viability Characteristics and the Vitality Characteristics outlined in the document "We Will With God's Help." This material is adapted from the Diocese of Massachusetts and the Vitality Characteristics are framed within the Baptismal Covenant, which is our "Covenant for Abundant Life" as baptized Christians. By adopting such criteria as a starting point for discussion, we, as member churches of the Diocese of New Jersey, can partner with each other in order to pursue Life. We can implement a process by which we can regularly review these indicators of life and health and develop strategies to address areas of weakness in mutually responsible ways. Our covenant will be strong to the extent that we are willing to speak the truth in Christ to one another.

Vitality: In order to partner with each other and to pursue Life, we realize that all ministry is local. Our Diocese is too big for the diocesan staff to be present to the extent necessary to support the ongoing conversation to assess, to develop strategic interventions, create linkages and develop relationships between congregations that support life and health. We have found that diocesan staff can conduct vestry retreats, provide consultations, create interventions, all of which create a certain amount of excitement and energy while they are there. However, the congregation quickly retreats to "business as usual" once they depart. So, as a diocese, it is necessary that we all be committed to the same ends (thus the reason for a covenant) and that we provide the necessary follow through to support the conversation and begin to make changes happen on the local level.

To achieve this, the Vitality Task Force proposes two things. First, we need to strengthen our Convocations via the current Dean structure. The Deans need to be the Diocese's link to the local church. They know where the struggling congregations are locally. They can support the local clergy in making the conversation happen around viability and vitality characteristics. They are the ones who can help develop relationships between congregations and create linkages that can lead to new life. In many parts of our Diocese strong and struggling congregations are separated by only a few miles. There is no reason for them to exist in isolation. The deans in their clericus meetings can help to facilitate the Covenant and seek out the resources necessary to bring life and health to the local church. We will be

working with Finance and Budget with the hope of providing some financial resources to the Convocation Deans that may assist them in the work we are asking them to do.

Second, we propose the establishment of “Shepherding Consultants” in each of our Convocations. These consultants would be people with the skill set necessary to serve as resources to the local congregations to engage them in conversation around mission, to assist struggling congregations envision a future, and to deliver a consistent message across the Diocese about mission that is reality based and solution focused. We propose three consultants per convocation. These consultants can also provide linkages to the Congregational Development Committee that can provide the specific resources necessary on a congregation by congregation basis. As shepherds, they are meant to walk along side, to support, and keep the conversation going about mission across the Diocese.

Viability: Finally, as a Diocese, we can no longer expend resources in places that have chosen to die. Sadly, if a congregation decides not to engage in this Covenant of Abundant Life, if they have no sense of mission and no desire to re-envision themselves, we need to be clear with them that in choosing to remain outside of the Covenant, they have chosen to remain outside the mainstream of the missional life of the diocese.

A covenant implies that we are responsible for each other. It depends on accountability to each other. It requires that we build the network of relationships that will build up the church and create the empowering fellowships that will make us alive and healthy. Our God who calls us into life desires that we be healthy and whole as his people, the Church. The Task Force on Vitality proposes this as our way forward to health and vitality. Diocesan Council endorsed this proposal. We heartily seek the endorsement by the 229th Convention of the Diocese of New Jersey.

(Endorsed by Diocesan Council September 18, 2012)

VITALITY TASK FORCE RESOLUTION

Be it resolved that the 229th Convention of the Diocese of New Jersey, adopt the recommendations of the Vitality Task Force Report and welcome the opportunity to enter into a Covenant of Abundant Life whereby we utilize the proposed Minimal Viability Characteristics and the Vitality Characteristics framed within the Baptismal Covenant to pursue Life and Health in our member congregations and develop relationships with one another.

Be it further resolved that we commit to review these indicators of life and health in all of our congregations utilizing “Shepherding Consultants” in our respective Convocations to engage in conversation about mission with one another and develop strategies to address areas of weakness in mutually responsible ways.

Be it further resolved that we choose to develop relationships among our congregations and create linkages and offer support to one another to reduce isolation, create partnerships, and to work together in pursuing new Life. To this end we commit to utilize our current Convocation structure under the leadership of our Deans.

Be it further resolved that we commit to speak the truth to one another in love, commit to pursue creative solutions for mission that are reality based and solution focused, and utilize the available resources of our Diocese in effective ways to build up the Body of Christ among us.

Minimal Viability Characteristics

Viability characteristics are those elements of congregational and diocesan life that are considered basic and essential. They represent the fundamental obligations and responsibilities that each congregation undertakes as a constituent part of this diocese as reflected in the Canons of the Diocese of New Jersey. They are presented here as a tool for self-evaluation so that clergy and vestry can work cooperatively to maintain the viability of the parish in these areas. Congregations that are experiencing difficulties in any of these areas are urged to avail themselves of resources available via the Diocesan Office, the Shepherding Consultants, or the Deans of their Convocations. Through dialog, mutual support and sharing of expertise, all of our congregations can become equipped to develop strategies leading to health and vitality.

- Essential leadership positions (wardens, vestry, treasurer, clerk) are filled and have regular turnover per parish bylaws.
- There is a regular, ongoing, stable clergy presence.
- Clergy and staff salaries and pensions are paid in a timely manner and meet at least minimum diocesan recommended compensation levels.
- Services are held on a regular basis as planned and announced.
- The congregation is current with its financial obligations, including payment of the Diocesan fair share asking and is prayerfully working toward the minimum of the 10% level of asking.
- There is an annual giving (stewardship pledge) program.
- A parish financial budget is prepared annually.
- Church properties (buildings and grounds) are free of major defects or these are being addressed. All property and liability insurance premiums are paid.
- The congregation files an annual parochial report and conducts a basic yearly financial audit.
- All clergy and appropriate lay persons have received Sexual Misconduct Awareness Training.

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Vitality Characteristics

“We will with God’s help.”

Our Baptismal Covenant with God in Christ unites us in our desire to use our God given gifts for ministry and mission. We work together, as brothers and sisters in Christ, to further the growth of God’s World among us. We need to be in partnership with one another to develop effective ministries to carry out our mission.

Below, you can find some vital characteristics for congregations tied to our baptismal promises that can be used as a self-assessment tool as we consider together the strengths we have for mission. No one congregation embodies all of these, but these vital characteristics speak to us about living into our baptismal life with one another. Hopefully, we can engage in dialog with one another and re-commit ourselves to the work of mutual upbuilding and transformation – to do the work of our Baptism, clergy and laity alike, with our eyes fixed on our Lord and God’s call to us. Rediscovering our strengths for mission, being aware of our weaknesses, may allow us to move forward into a new vision of what we can become as the Diocese of New Jersey, *with God’s help*.

Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers?

Responsibility for growing in the Lord and joy in our Common Prayer.

- Worship that is vibrant and fresh in expression and rooted in tradition with the result that people are energized and inspired for daily life.
- The planning and leadership of worship invites participation and engages the creativity of the entire congregation; all age groups, newcomers and established members.
- Worship expresses the cultural diversity of the congregation and its neighboring communities.
- The congregation considers alternative worship times, venues and liturgies.
- Education and formation opportunities for discipleship are offered to children, youth, young adults, adults, and elders (We understand discipleship as living our lives following the example of Jesus’ life and teaching, in fulfillment of our baptismal covenant)
- Lay and clergy leaders are actively encouraged to enhance their own skills for ministry through participation in diocesan, provincial and national learning and training opportunities.
- The curriculum or educational programs or resources offer a global perspective and celebrate ethnic diversity and gender equality.

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Reconciliation that leads to wholeness and holiness of life.

- Congregation reflects demographics of its surrounding area.
- Congregation welcomes visitors with Christian hospitality and has a process for incorporating new members.

- Congregational leadership attends to one another with listening hearts seeking the grace of conversion as they shape the mission and ministry of their church.
- Congregation resolves conflict in a timely and healthy manner.
- The leaders embody the theology of servant ministry. They delegate responsibilities and duties, encourage and empower others and communicate openly.
- The congregation's budget and financial information are available and transparent to the congregation and members have an opportunity to engage in the budget process.

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Willing to tell our story and allow it to shape how we live.

- The congregation uses electronic and print communications vehicles including newsletters, website, and electronic newsletters which are engaging, accurate and timely and include contact information for the church office, clergy and lay leaders, as well as directions, service times and mission statement.
- The congregation has a media relations program that builds good relations with local media, including press releases, op/ed commentary articles, letters to the editor and appearances on local cable and, where present, radio stations.
- The congregation conducts creative outreach activities such as direct mail, special events and collaborations with advocacy groups, non-profits and community groups.
- The congregation has achievable and measurable goals, strategies and objectives which members know and support.
- The vestry and clergy engage in annual mutual ministry reviews that focus on achievement of goals in the context of the congregation's participation in God's mission.
- The congregation uses fellowship opportunities to deepen the discipleship of its members.
- The congregation gathers to celebrate, support and care for each other in the midst of parish life.
- Members of the congregation understand stewardship as their response to God's love and God's call to tend and care for the whole of creation, including ourselves, our possessions and "this fragile earth, our island home."
- Members of the congregation practice simplicity of life and generosity in giving as spiritual disciplines rooted in gratitude to God.
- Members of the congregation throughout the year are asked to support the ministry of the church with their time, talents and treasure, especially through the practices of proportionate giving (or tithing) and witnessing to God's work in their lives.

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Called to lives of service, to show Christ to the world in what we do.

- At least 10 percent of the parish budget, excluding the diocesan fair share asking, is spent on outreach.

- The congregation has at least one signature effort of service, witness or advocacy that includes a broad cross-section of congregational members and has the support of the entire congregation.
- The congregation looks for opportunities to engage in collaborative ministry with other churches and faiths.
- The congregation has a visible presence in the community, and clergy and lay leaders are engaged in community activities and leadership.
- People in the community who are not members of the congregation know about the congregation and are regularly informed of the congregation's activities and offerings.
- People in the community come to the church for a variety of reasons in addition to worship, e.g. lectures, afterschool programs, day care, etc.

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Embody Christ in a broken world by removing barriers, and taking risks to further the Kingdom.

- The congregation intentionally and systematically helps its members discern their gifts for ministry in the church and in their families, workplaces, communities and beyond.
- Once gifts for ministry are discerned, the congregation helps its members understand where they are called to exercise those gifts and encourages them to pursue that call.
- The congregation's current mission initiatives stretch its members by calling them to work alongside and on behalf of people who are different from them in language, culture, ethnicity or economic status.
- The congregation has engaged a community issue during the past year.
- The congregation supports initiatives that work for justice in our world, e.g. Episcopal Relief and Development, our Companion Diocesan, Millennium Development Goals and *Nets For Life*, Bread for the World, Food for the Poor, etc.

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